

CHURCH HISTORY AND DOCTRINE

Saints at War

BYU professors gather stories of Latter-day Saint veterans.

JOSEPH R. Banks, '48, slipped past the Nazi guards into the European countryside. He and three other escaped prisoners of war traveled by night for several days, restricting their movements until the middle of the night, when they could travel undetected.



Dennis Wright (left) and Robert Freeman have teamed up to create an archive of stories from the more than 100,000 Latter-day Saints who served in World War II.

One night as they crept along, Banks was startled by a voice. Suddenly a door opened in a house to his left. Light flooded out, illuminating him in his prisoner-of-war uniform, and a German soldier came through the doorway, shouting at him.

"Before I could think of what to do, I was startled... to hear myself respond with a calm, confident German phrase that obviously was appropriate to what he'd asked me," Banks recalled. "He then replied to whatever I'd said with an almost cheerful, 'Ja, Ja, Ja!' ...and went back into the house."

When they were safely on their way again, Banks' companions asked him what he had said. "I told them I had no idea what either he or I said, since I couldn't speak German."

For Banks the experience was a miracle and a reminder that he was not alone while he served in World War II. "It thrilled me to know that God was still watching out for me and that he cared for me."

Banks' story is one of almost 1,000 recorded in a growing archive of experiences of Latter-day Saint veterans (whether they were members of the Church of Jesus Christ during the war or joined later) housed in the L. Tom Perry Special Collections in BYU's Harold B. Lee Library. The archive, called Saints at War, was begun two years ago by Robert C. Freeman, '85, assistant professor of Church history and doctrine, and Dennis A. Wright, '73, associate professor of Church history and doctrine. The two have set in motion the only living archive of LDS veterans' wartime experiences.

"About 1,100 World War II veterans die each day," says Freeman. "It's sort of a 'speak now or forever hold your testimony' moment."

Freeman and Wright have found that many veterans choose to speak now. Veterans traditionally have kept their experiences to themselves. But for this project they have stepped forward to share and record their stories.

"It is really the spirit of Elijah turning the hearts of the children to their fathers and the hearts of the fathers to their children," says Freeman.

Freeman's interest in LDS veterans began when he taught an adult Church history survey course at BYU several years ago. At the end of a lecture on World War II, a class member told of his service in the war and how he had been deeply affected by Church support he received during the war. "It was a brief comment," Freeman says, "but it stayed with me."

As Freeman researched for other classes and presentations, he realized that few first-person accounts of LDS veterans had been preserved. For Wright the project was compelling because his own father was a veteran of World War II, and he felt that these voices were worth preserving.

"If this is a time filled with wars and rumors of wars, these accounts could bring great insight and understanding and even encouragement to future generations, who may be faced with the same challenges that these young men and women were faced with," says Wright.

With the help of up to eight student assistants at a time, Freeman and Wright gather and catalog submissions, conduct personal interviews, transcribe tapes submitted by veterans or their families, and compile veterans' written histories.